

September 4, 2022

Post-Pandemic Purpose: Adults
Ecclesiastes 9:7-10; Colossians 3:17, 22-24

For the past few weeks I've been introducing my sermons with a reflection on some of the changes in society and the church that are appearing as a result of the past two-and-a-half years of Covid-19. One of the most striking areas of change in our country has to do with work, and there have been several different revelations that have come out of the pandemic and the shut-downs. The first revelation came from the early weeks of total shut-down, when we all learned a new term: "essential workers." These were the people whose jobs were so indispensable that they had to go out and face the scary new disease while the rest of us hid inside making sourdough. We also noticed that most of these people who were so necessary for our survival that we needed them to risk their lives for us are not paid very much – nurse's aides, sanitation workers, grocery store clerks. Meanwhile, the people with the highest-paid jobs in our society – CEOs, movie stars, college football coaches – are . . . what's the word I'm looking for? . . . *non-essential*. So at least for a brief moment in time, we reflected on the possibility that we have some very screwed-up priorities regarding jobs.

The second revelation came a few months into the pandemic, when things began to open up, tentatively, a wee bit. Many businesses, especially in retail and hospitality, sent word to their former employees that they could come back now, and an awful lot of those employees replied, "Meh." Some of us said, "Well, they'll be back when the government relief handouts end," but then the stimulus and unemployment checks ended, and they still didn't go back. Finally – and this is called capitalism – employers started offering higher pay, and some of them returned. It seems that a few months away from a miserable job where you receive constant abuse from customers for very little pay was enough for many to realize they didn't want to do that any more. And the rest of us realized that some of the nice things we had taken for granted before Covid, like inexpensive restaurants, had been made possible by paying the workers poverty-level wages. The ripples of this realization are still spreading.

Third, and this one's not a revelation as much as a revolution, there came the whole Work from Home thing. According to one estimate, only about 40% of the US workforce has a job that can be done remotely (I mean, sanitation workers and surgeons pretty much need to be there in person), but to that 40%, the world changed. We sheltered in place, upgraded our internet, learned how to Zoom, and tried to figure out how to do our jobs in a new way, and most of us soon learned that at least a good part of our work could be done from the kitchen table. Or the sofa. And then we realized that, sometimes, it wasn't just possible; it was *better*. We began to question some of the accepted wisdom of the office world. Early in the pandemic a software company called Buffer decided to do something for their now-entirely-home-based employees. This was during the time when kids were still trying to do school from home and life was chaotic for families, and so the management at Buffer sent an email to all employees saying that for the next four weeks everyone was to work only four days, instead of five, but they would still be paid their full salary. Take one day each week to care for yourself and your family. At the end of that four-week period, the management looked at their productivity stats to see how much they had suffered for their generosity. Productivity had gone *up*. Okay, probably a fluke, right? But why not extend it a little longer? So they made it six months. At that company now, work-from-home and a four-day work week are standard.

Why did that work? Well, much has already been written on the seismic shifts in the working world of the past two years, and more is coming, but among the things we've learned are: some of those meetings really could have been taken care of with an email, people have complicated schedules that are not all nine-to-five and it doesn't hurt work quality to allow some flexibility, and a lot of what was going on in the hours in the office wasn't productive work but performative work. That is, people weren't doing the job they were hired to do so much as trying to *look* as if they were, to impress their bosses. One book I read this summer called this "LARP-ing your job." I should probably explain that: LARP is an acronym for Live Action Role Playing – like Civil War re-enactors or the knights and ladies at the Renaissance Faire. LARP-ing your job is playing the role of busy employee without necessarily doing anything. It's moving lots of papers, sending lots of emails, filling your public online calendar with meetings. It's hanging around the office after closing time, whether you do anything or not, just to be seen as the last to leave. It's sending a work email, but scheduling it to go out at 10:30 at night so that everyone who gets it will think you were still working at that hour. And, of course, every LARP-er puts pressure on co-workers to play the same game, just to keep up.

What has happened is that, in so many ways, and for people in every kind of job and income level, the pandemic has shown us how broken our work world is. Now it's way too early to say whether anything will actually change, but much is stirring. So this Labor Day weekend, on a holiday founded to celebrate organized Labor, let's think about what the Bible says about work.

Our first reading today comes from Ecclesiastes 9, verses 7-10:

⁷Go, eat your bread with enjoyment, and drink your wine with a merry heart; for God has long ago approved what you do. ⁸Let your garments always be white; do not let oil be lacking on your head. ⁹Enjoy life with the wife whom you love, all the days of your vain life that are given you under the sun, because that is your portion in life and in your toil at which you toil under the sun. ¹⁰Whatever your hand finds to do, do with your might; for there is no work or thought or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol, to which you are going.

Now we read from chapter 3 of Paul's letter to the Colossians, verse 17 and 22-24:

¹⁷And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

²²Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything, not only while being watched and in order to please them, but wholeheartedly, fearing the Lord. ²³Whatever your task, do it from your soul, as done for the Lord and not for your masters, ²⁴since you know that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward; you serve the Lord Christ.

Both of these scriptures, one from the Old Testament and one from the New, have something to say about work, but sometimes before you can look at what a scripture says you have to clear the air a bit, and both of these have some issues to deal with. The first one, from Ecclesiastes, recommends hard work as part of finding joy in life, but it also adds that we should work with all our might, because we're all going to Sheol eventually, and there's not going to be *anything* to do there. Remember that the Bible is a story of discovery, leading toward Christ. That means that some of the early stuff is going to be incomplete. In the Old Testament, there was no concept of

resurrection to be with God after death, as the New Testament clearly teaches. Instead, they just held a concept of a dull, underground holding cell for souls called Sheol. Don't worry about Sheol. We've had updates since then. Second, in the passage from Colossians, Paul also recommends throwing ourselves into work, but we do have to note that he specifically addresses this instruction to slaves. This does not mean that slavery is good or acceptable, only that it was a part of the world in which Paul wrote. Don't confuse the historical context of the Bible with its message. That message, though, is nearly the same in both passages: work is a gift of God and can be a gift *to* God. The author of Ecclesiastes saw life as short, brutish, and empty of hope, but even from that worldview he sees that joy can be found: in food, wine, love, and by working with all their might. Paul, speaking to *slaves*, people whose very lives were in bondage, says to give themselves freely to work with all their *psyches*, all their souls, as a gift to God.

And this is even more true for those of us who enjoy more hope and greater freedom. There is something ennobling, something elevating, in good work done well. You know that moment when you've worked for hours on a project and finally finished? It doesn't matter what it is, building something, planting something, or just cleaning the garage. What do you do? You straighten up, look around at the neatly organized shelves and tools hung on the wall again, and swept floors, and you nod to yourself and say in your heart, "Yeah." That moment is a moment of satisfaction of the same order as the satisfaction of creating art. Animals don't do that. A rabbit digs a burrow, and it doesn't step back and say, "Yeah. Now, *that's* a burrow." Other rabbits out for a walk don't stop and say, "Did you make that? That's good!" Only humans have that sort of irrational delight in doing good work for its own sake. Well, not just humans. I know of one other. Genesis 1 tells us that when God finished creating the heavens and earth, he stepped back, nodded, and said, "Yeah! I like that." Do you see what I'm saying? Biblically, good work and the pleasure and fulfilment that we find in doing it, is one of the lingering vestiges of the very Image of God in us.

Unfortunately, like every gift of God, we humans have found ways to defile it, to destroy the dignity and beauty of work, some of which I talked about earlier. When we make jobs *just* about money or measure the dignity of work by its pay, when we do work of no value or devalue the work of others, when we go through the motions of work only – all these are corruptions of a good gift of God that have been rife in our society. But our pandemic has spurred a rethinking of the world of work. Let us encourage that. On this Labor Day, let us remember to honor those who do good work: essential and non-essential, skilled craftsmen and rank beginners, paid or volunteer, those who work with hammer and nails and those who work with Excel spreadsheets. If they are working well, because it is good to do good work, they are not far from God. And when *you* work, do it with all your might, with all your soul. Do it as if you worked for God.

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Final Word: The seismic shifts brought on by the pandemic are affecting the church as well, and maybe it's time. We too should be examining how we use our time and energy – where we are devoting our labor. Have we, like our larger culture, devalued some kinds of work and given too much stress to others? Have we created a culture of busy-ness without meaning? Have we been LARP-ing church? Trying to look like what everyone thinks a church looks like instead of actually being what we are called to be? All good questions, and we've started asking some of them in our teams and committees and councils. It looks to be a long process, but three years ago we weren't even asking. That's progress, I think.